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Bringing History to Life Through Music

COMMENTS: On a March Allegedly Played by the British at Yorktown, 1781

by Arthur Schrader

Since 1881, a story has circulated among some Americans that the British played a march called “The World Turned Upside Down” (hereafter WTUD or Yorktown/WTUD) during their surrender at Yorktown in October 1781. Over the years this story has been accepted by more and more Americans (though without corroboration). After 1940 at least 33 American professional historians accepted the story and published it in their textbooks (still without corroboration). This seems to have encouraged several American novelists and one British poet, Robert Graves, to adopt the story and embroider it for their books.

What are the problems? First: The evidence that this happened is poor by any historical standard but historians haven’t bothered to look. Second: Nearly one hundred years of professional cataloging of early Anglo-American music hasn’t turned up a single eighteenth-century **British** tune or march called WTUD. (Writers who say there were *several* English WTUD tunes in the eighteenth-century are guessing from bad extrapolations). Third: Three different twentieth-century American groups have made strong claims for *three different tunes*, they call the Yorktown/WTUD but not one of these claims stands up to investigation.

Let’s begin with the basic *historical* question. What proof is there, that the British at Yorktown played a march that anyone living in the eighteenth-century called WTUD? The Yorktown/WTUD story was first published in Major Alexander Garden’s *Anecdotes of the American Revolution* . . . (Charleston, S. C., 1828), forty-seven years after Yorktown. Garden quoted a letter from Major William Jackson who described the surrender negotiations as though he had been an eyewitness, but *didn’t mention that he was in Europe, not Yorktown* at the time.

Apparently, in that same letter, Jackson also stated that a French fleet had sailed from Brest for America early in May 1781 at the instigation of his superior officer, Lt. Col. John Laurens. That French fleet was crucial to the victory at Yorktown, but Laurens was in no way responsible for getting it to America. In fact, that French fleet had sailed late in March *before* Laurens and his secretary, Major Jackson, arrived at Versailles. This shows that Jackson cannot be trusted for details of past events in which he was closely involved, much less for details of something that allegedly happened at Yorktown while he was 3,000 miles away in Europe.

Lt. Col. Laurens was Washington’s representative at the Yorktown surrender negotiations so he could have written to Jackson and described the Yorktown events, but by the same reasoning Jackson *could* have reported how he got his information. **This he did not do!** As published, Jackson’s Yorktown/WTUD story is, at best, a dubious “third-hand account”—Laurens(?) to Jackson to Garden—masquerading as an eyewitness report.

This Yorktown/WTUD story had been ignored for a long time. From 1781 to 1881 not even newspapers or “pop” historians included the WTUD in their Yorktown accounts. Then in 1881, Henry P. Johnston revived the Yorktown/WTUD story from Garden’s book (with credit), for his excellent *Yorktown Campaign and the Surrender of Cornwallis*, after which a few Harvard-trained historians repeated the story in the 1880s and 1890s without checking it out or naming their sources. Around that time a few people began to ask about the music so that search has been going on for just over a century.

The first to write that he *might* have found the WTUD music was John Tasker Howard, a music historian who about 1931 wrote a booklet, *The Music of George Washington’s Time* for the Bicentennial of Washington’s birth. Howard was a fine scholar who knew a great deal about American classical music and a lot about Stephen Foster’s songs but not much about the other songs of ordinary people and next to nothing about fife and drum music. (This last point is important. The surrender terms specified that the surrendering troops could beat British or German airs. “*Beat*” applies only to drums.)

Howard’s main problem was that he did not realize that some old songs had different names for their tunes and texts (by Howard’s time, most tunes and texts had the same name). In the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a single well-known tune might have a dozen or more different sets of words having different titles without the tune-name changing. One illustration: Since the Revolution, the “Yankee Doodle” tune has had more than a hundred different sets of words, most with their own text titles, but the “Yankee Doodle” name has stuck to the music all that time. Only occasionally does a tune title change to match a text title. “The Star Spangled Banner” tune-name changes from “Anacreon in Heaven” to “Adams and Liberty” and finally to “The Star Spangled Banner” were an exception, not the rule.

John Tasker Howard learned that a 1642 English Royalist tune, “When the King Enjoys His Own Again” had *once* had a song text called “The World Turned Upside Down” associated with it (in 1646). He then suggested that this “King Enjoys” tune might also be the as yet undiscovered WTUD music. Howard didn’t know that WTUD text in no way fitted Yorktown.

Unfortunately for Howard’s guesswork, there is only one known period copy of that 1646 WTUD text; no evidence that it ever was sung; and no sign of any later reprint until 1923 when it appeared in Hyder Rollins’s *Cavalier and Puritan: Ballads and Broad-sides Illustrating the Period of the Great Rebellion, 1640–1660!* Therefore that 1646 WTUD text did not circulate enough to change the tune name “King Enjoys” to WTUD over the 135 years that passed from 1646 to the 1781 surrender. Remember, the men at Yorktown were soldiers, not antiquarians. Also unfortunately, though Howard was tentative in his notes, his published music copy

appeared with a bold face “**The World Turned Upside Down**” title in his booklet. The result is that unless you read Howard’s text carefully you can easily come away with the false notion that the “King Enjoys” music has been proved to be the WTUD music. In fact, the “King Enjoys” music was *never* known as WTUD until Howard published it that way in 1932!

“Ancient” Fife and Drum Corps were among the first to add this “King Enjoys”/WTUD to their repertoires. Ed Olsen, Archivist of the Company of Fifers & Drummers, has told me that the Charles T. Kirk Corps of Brooklyn was using this tune under the WTUD title when he played with them in the 1940s. (There is an audio tape cassette in the Company archives on which Ed talks about this and plays the music.)

The second twentieth-century claim for a (quite different) Yorktown/WTUD tune appeared in 1942 in Frank Luther’s book *Americans and Their Songs*. Luther was a Country and Western singer and composer. His book offers a good sample of the songs of ordinary people for a period of several centuries but his historical notes are frequently ridiculous. Luther was the first person I know of to publish the alleged Yorktown/WTUD song I call “Buttercups” because the first line begins “If buttercups buzzed, after the bees.” A couple of historians and some folk singers (for example, Burl Ives), adopted “Buttercups” as their notion of the music the British played during their surrender, but there is no evidence in their books, or anywhere else, to support their claim.

The third twentieth-century claim to have found the words (and the music) of the Yorktown/WTUD came from three major American historians, Henry Commager, Richard Morris and Samuel Eliot Morison. Their WTUD text appeared (bowdlerized) in Commager and Morris’s *The Spirit of Seventy-Six*. Later, Morison printed a “Derry Down” tune under a WTUD title in his *Oxford History of the American People*. Their WTUD text which I call “Goody Bull” because its first line is “Goody Bull and her daughter together fell out,” was intended to be sung to “Derry Down” in 1766, but so were more than a hundred other texts by the beginning of the Revolution. No one hearing fifes and drums playing the “Derry Down” melody would have known what text/title was intended.

If the British had “beat” the “Derry Down” tune the Americans wouldn’t have called it WTUD. They would only have wondered why the British were “beating” such an unmilitary tune as “The Bishop of Canterbury” or “A Cobbler There Was,” which were two of the best known eighteenth-century song texts to the tune. And such an odd tune choice certainly would have “made” the newspapers!

So to sum up:

1. There is no good evidence that the British played a tune called WTUD at Yorktown. Major Jackson, who first wrote they did, wasn’t at Yorktown and showed a poor memory for details when he wrote about the Revolution forty-odd years later.
2. Nearly a century of cataloging and searching has not turned up a single eighteenth-century **English** tune called WTUD, no matter what is said to the contrary.
3. All three of the current tunes claimed to be the Yorktown/WTUD music got their WTUD titles late in the nineteenth or in the twentieth-century!

NOTES

The preceding account was adapted from *American Music* 16/2 (Summer 1998) by Arthur Schrader.

The John Tasker Howard booklet was also part of a large U.S. Government volume on Washington’s time with chapters written by many different specialists. It was published in 1931 or 1932 and may perhaps still be found in some New England town libraries.

“ANCIENT Fife & Drum Corps” (their term) are volunteer groups of amateur musicians who play a repertory of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century military and popular tunes on keyless wood fifes and large rope-tensioned drums. Headquarters, Museum and Library: Company of Fifers and Drummers, P.O. Box 277, 62 North Main Street, Ivoryton, Connecticut 06442.

I have deliberately not previously mentioned the alleged “custom” of allowing a defeated but “gallant” defender in a siege to “beat” one of the victor’s tunes because I don’t believe it. The authorities (Col. John Womack Wright, Instructor, West Point, 1931 and Lewis Winstock, author of *Songs and Music of the Redcoats*, strongly disagree on whether there was such a custom. Note that American newspapers from the beginning of the Revolution list the surrender terms for a number of sieges (often with music provisions). Not until the surrender of Charleston (May 1780) is there a reference to playing one of the victor’s tunes and then only as a belated order from General Clinton that the surrendering Americans must not beat a British march.

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